

Pedagogical grammar

David Newby

Pedagogical grammar, which we may define as a grammar developed for learners of a foreign language, draws on two separate but interrelated areas of theory: firstly, descriptive models of grammar, which can be incorporated into pedagogical reference grammars and teaching materials and formulated in ways which make the description accessible to the learner, and secondly, theories of second-language acquisition, which will provide the basis for classroom methodology.

Pedagogical and linguistic grammars

Considerable discussion (see Dirven, 1990; Chalker, 1994) has been given to the differences between pedagogical and linguistic grammar, variously termed ‘theoretical’ or ‘scientific’, in particular concerning the extent to which a pedagogical description should have a theoretical basis and what this basis should be. Despite the large number of reference grammars on the market and the important role which grammar rules play in many classrooms, there appears to be relatively little coherent theory underlying rule formulation. This is somewhat surprising since as Dirven (1990: 8) points out ‘learners can be and are misled into all kinds of wrong generalisations by the inaccurate rule formulations in their textbooks’. Some grammarians have attempted to give a theoretical basis to their rules: for example, Leech, Svartvik (1975/2002) draw on the linguistic model of *functional/systemic grammar; Swan (1994) outlines his ‘design criteria’ for rule formulation.. Yet on the whole the area of rule formulation is one that is relatively unexplored (see Westney, 1994).

The main issues discussed in pedagogical grammar are:

- the aims of grammar teaching (knowing about grammar or using grammar; manipulating sentences or free production)
- the categorisation of grammar (form, meaning, use) into units which will form a syllabus or teaching objectives
- the extent to which grammar should be dealt with separately from other aspects of language
- the use of rules, in particular in how far a conscious focus on grammar rules assists acquisition
- the type of grammatical exercises and activities and tasks which will lead to automatization.

Types of pedagogical grammar

In modern grammar teaching the influences of the following approaches are most strongly discernible or influential.

Traditional grammar.

Grammar is defined primarily as a set of forms and structures, which comprise the main focus of the textbook syllabus. Whilst grammatical meaning plays an important role, it is dealt with in an unsystematic way. The sentence is the main unit of analysis and emphasis is placed on the student's ability to form correct sentences. The usual classroom methodology is based on presentation, practice, production, whereby it is the first two which receive most attention.

Learning is seen largely as a conscious process and grammar rules are used *deductively*; that is to say, they are explained by teacher or textbook prior to the practice stage. The most common forms of exercise type are gapped sentences, pattern drills and sentences for transformation, reflecting a form-based, rather uncontextualized view of grammar. Grammatical competence is measured according to the student's ability to manipulate sentences, rather than being performance-oriented.

Communicative grammar

Here, language is seen as the process of communicating messages between human beings in actual contexts, grammar being a means of expressing certain types of meanings – notions and functions – through grammatical forms. Grammatical objectives are thus defined in terms of notions rather than forms – ‘referring to present activities’ through the present progressive, ‘expression intention’ through *going to* etc. (see van Ek and Trim, 1991). As far as grammatical rules are concerned, the distinction between ‘knowing about’ grammar and ‘knowing how’ to use it, referred to as declarative vs procedural knowledge (see Johnson, 1994), led to shift of focus in methodology from analysis and controlled practice to use-based activities. Rules tend to be dealt with inductively, that is to say the understanding emerges from use, rather than the other way round. Various important features of communicative methodology can be applied to grammar; in particular, a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach based on small-group oral activities (information gap and similar communicative games), which is reflected in a number of grammar practice books (e.g. Ur, 1989). Whilst the communicative approach brought certain benefits in the area of methodology, its failure to integrate grammar in a coherent way led to a widespread but quite false ‘grammar versus communication’ dichotomy.

Acquisition-based approaches to grammar

In the 1980s various factors led some methodologists to take a quite different view of grammar. At the core of this movement was an increasing interest in the psychological processes underlying first-language acquisition and the belief that many of these processes could apply to second languages if suitable learning environments and conditions were provided. The best-known proponent of this view was Krashen (1981), who distinguished between *learning* – with a conscious focus on grammar (explicit rules, terminology etc) and automatic, unconscious *acquisition*. It was only through the latter that students could achieve communicative competence. The proposed method entailed providing learners with what he termed ‘comprehensible input’ and allowing the intake process to function automatically, following an innate acquisition order for which the learner's brain was already ‘wired up’ and which could not be influenced by structuring the input.

Cognitive approaches to grammar

Various views of grammar learning and teaching can be located under the general heading of ‘cognitive’. Common to all is the recognition that there are fundamental differences between first and second-language acquisition processes and that a conscious focus on grammar can be beneficial. They reject, however, the passive view of learning inherent in traditional ways of teaching grammar. Earlier approaches centred on the notion of *language awareness* – that learners should be guided towards focusing on aspects of language and be encouraged to use various cognitive strategies to explore for themselves how language works. Thus, grammar rules explained by the teacher give way to consciousness-raising or discovery techniques and tasks given to students (see Rutherford and Sharwood Smith, 1988; Bolitho and Tomlinson, 1995). More recently, theories from cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology have extended the

scope of these approaches in three ways. First, the focus on the nature of grammatical meaning provides theoretical support to the notional grammar found in communicative language teaching (see Holme, 2009). Second, a comprehensive analysis of cognitive processes which underlie learning – attention, memory etc. – provides a theoretical foundation which can feed into the design of grammar activities (see Robinson, 2001; DeKeyser, 2007). Third, the stage model view of learning initially proposed by Anderson (1983) has the potential to bridge the gulf between competence and performance (see Johnson, 1996; Newby, 2008). Various pedagogical models based on cognitive linguistics have been proposed (see Skehan, 1998; Littlemore, 2009). Though still in their infancy, cognitive approaches, particularly in tandem with a communicative view of language, provide a theoretical framework which has important applications in grammar teaching.

It would probably be true to say that modern classrooms reflect a variety of approaches. Whilst there is almost uniform rejection of traditional grammar among methodologists, the security its structured practices offer to teachers and learners is obviously appealing. A traditional core, with bits of communicative methodology and awareness-raising activities superimposed, is a not uncommon classroom scenario.

References

- Anderson, J.R. (1983) *The architecture of cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bolitho, R. and Tomlinson, B. (1995) *Discover English*, Oxford: Heinemann.
- Chalker, S. (1992) 'Pedagogical Grammar: Principles and Problems,' in M. Bygate et al (eds.), *Grammar and the language teacher*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- DeKeyser, R.M. (ed.) (2007) *Practice in a second language. Perspectives from applied linguistics and cognitive psychology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Dirven, R. (1990) 'Pedagogical grammar', *Language Teaching*, 23, 1: 1-18.
- Holme, R. (2009) *Cognitive linguistics and language teaching*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Johnson, K. (1994) 'Teaching Declarative and Procedural Knowledge', in M. Bygate et al (eds.) *Grammar and the language teacher*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Johnson, K. (1996) *Language teaching and skill learning*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Krashen, S.D. (1981) *Second language acquisition and second language learning*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Leech, G. and Svartvik, J. (1975/2002) *A communicative grammar of English*, London: Longman.
- Littlemore, J. (2009) *Applying cognitive linguistics to second language learning and teaching*, Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Newby, D. (2008) 'Pedagogical grammar: a cognitive+communicative approach', in: W. Delanoy and L. Volkmann (eds.) *Future Perspectives for English Language Teaching*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 29-44.
- Robinson, P. (ed.) (2001) *Cognition and second language instruction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rutherford, W.E. and Sharwood Smith, M. (1988) *Grammar and second language teaching*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Skehan, P. (1998) *A cognitive approach to language learning*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swan, M. (1994) 'Design criteria for pedagogical grammars', in M. Bygate et al (eds.) *Grammar and the language teacher*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.
- Ur, P. (1989) *Grammar practice activities*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Ek, J.A. and Trim, J.L.M. (1991) *Threshold Level 1990*, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Press.

Westney, P. (1994) 'Rules and Pedagogical Grammar', in T. Odlin (ed.) *Perspectives on pedagogical grammar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Further reading

Batstone, R. (1994) *Grammar*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bygate, M. et al (eds.) (1994) *Grammar and the language teacher*, Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall.

Hinkel, E. and Fotos, S. (eds.) (2002) *New perspectives on grammar teaching in second language classrooms*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Odlin, T. (ed.) (1994) *Perspectives on pedagogical grammar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.